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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA AIMS TO WIN BY A WIDE MARGIN IN TUVA

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Embassy visited the Republic of Tuva October 1-5, in advance of the October 8 regional election. Tuva is tightly controlled by Regional Head Sherig-Ool Oorzhak, who became a member of United Russia (YR) eight months ago, and it is widely believed that YR will win a decisive majority, with the help of administrative resources and official encouragement. While the Communist Party (KPRF) continues to have loyal followers and says it is confident it will exceed the seven percent threshold, it appears to be relatively weak. Rodina, the Patriots' Party of Russia (PPR), and the Russian Party of Life (RPL) may end up cannibalizing each others' vote and barely cross the threshold, with the regional YR leadership showing little tolerance for the purported second party-of-power. LDPR, a niche party in Tuva, is not expected to make the cut. End summary.

October 8 Regional Elections

2. (SBU) Tuva is one of the poorest regions of the Russian Federation. About 50% of its population lives below the poverty line and in some areas the unemployment rate is almost 30 percent. Sherig-Ool Oorzhak has been Head of the Republic for 16 years. His current term expires in April 2007, but it is likely he will stand again for Head of the Republic because he is still in good health and is popular. However, United Russia (YR) Head Sholban Kara-Ool has his sights on the post and told us that the time has come for "new blood."

3. (SBU) While there are 15 parties registered in Tuva and eight parties submitted documents, only six parties are participating in the October 8 elections -- United Russia (YR), the Communist Party (KPRF), Rodina, the Russian Party of Life (RPL), the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and the Patriots' Party of Russia (PPR). According to Tuva Election Commission (TEC) Chair Sholban Mongush, the Agrarian Party did not make the September 25 deadline to provide final documentation and the Pensioners Party's documents violated some election regulations. Neither party contested the TEC's rulings. Both PPR and RPL were rejected for violations but were reinstated after appealing to the courts. Mongush complained that he still felt RPL's violations were real and they should not have been allowed to compete. He said that

the TEC had to reprint all the bulletins at great cost, in order to include RPL.

14. (SBU) 162 deputies are up for election to the Velikiy Khural (parliament) -- 130 part-time deputies in the Chamber of Representatives and 32 full-time deputies in the Legislative Chamber. The Chamber of Representatives will be elected by party list. In the Legislative Chamber, 16 deputies will be elected in single-mandate districts and 16 by party list. The necessary turnout for the election to be valid is 25 percent. Kyzyl Mayor Dmitriy Dongak predicted the turnout would be 50 - 60 percent. There are approximately 165,000 eligible voters in Tuva and 60,000 of them live in Kyzyl. There are 184 polling stations in Tuva, 31 of which are in Kyzyl. Each party is allowed one observer at a time in a polling station. There will be three roving Central Elections Commission representatives from Moscow observing the elections process on Sunday. TEC Chair Mongush said that preliminary results would be available by October 9 for Kyzyl and by October 11 for the regions. Final results are required within 10 days of the elections, but he said they likely would be ready in 8 or 9 days.

15. (SBU) Beginning October 7, all "agitation" will stop (even on TV and radio) and no campaign materials will be allowed within 50 meters of a polling station. During the campaign, parties were allowed free airtime on state-owned media -- 40 seconds per day (except weekends) on radio and 50 seconds per day (except weekends) on TV. According to Regional Head of Rodina Damdinchap Khovalig, while the authorities have followed the rules, most of the TV airtime was slotted for late morning when no one except pensioners were watching. Radio spots were broadcast before 8 A.M. As a result, the parties relied on fliers and pamphlets to reach voters.

16. (SBU) According to First Deputy Chairman of Tuva Aleksandr Brokert, YR and PPR (which consists mostly of businesspeople)

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have well-organized campaigns with a definite focus. KPRF, RPL, and Rodina are campaigning on criticism of the party in power, and LDPR has largely been silent. He said there is not much party identification in Tuva because the population is small and people will vote for those they know (frequently a relative, friend, coworker, or boss). According to Mayor Dongak, the main issues for the electorate are housing, salaries, utilities (especially heat since winter temperatures in Tuva can reach minus 50 C), and crime.

United Russia Sparing No Expense to Woo Voters

17. (SBU) United Russia has pulled out all the stops in Tuva to ensure a solid win on October 8. Local hero and Minister of Emergency Situations Sergey Shoigu visited Kyzyl and was featured heavily on TV and in YR's campaign posters. He was also featured at length in a campaign film shown by YR on October 4 during a two-and-a-half hour long Soviet-style concert held in Kyzyl's main theater. Head of Republic Oorzhak, three Russian State Duma deputies (including the extremely popular three-time Olympic-gold-medal-winner wrestler Aleksandr Karelin), and other high-ranking officials gave speeches, followed by performances by well-known local celebrities and dance troupes. The audience consisted mainly of pensioners, veterans, government workers, and Molodaya Gvardiya members (YR's youth wing), and their friends. There was something for everyone -- pop songs and the YR bear mascot for the young generation, Soviet nostalgia songs for pensioners and veterans, traditional Russian and traditional Tuvan performances to appeal to both nationalities in the audience. Molodaya Gvardiya helped organize the event and participated in several dance numbers. According to independent journalist Sayana Mongush, seats were also padded with people from the regions who were persuaded to attend even though they were not YR members because it was a free

trip to a concert in Kyzyl. She also said that pressure was put on the performers, who were not paid for their efforts, to participate in the concert. Other famous Tuvans such as the renowned throat-singer Kongar-Ool Ondar have been recruited to campaign for YR throughout Tuva's regions.

18. (SBU) Later, at a dinner that included Karelin, Brokert, and other Tuvan business and political leaders, Kara-Ool said he expected YR to get at least 65 percent of the vote on October 8 (Oorzhak has claimed YR will get 80 percent). He was pragmatic about his reasons for being a part of YR: he wants to eventually become head of Tuva and YR, as the party of power, seems to be the best option. He said the region needed a new, younger leader (i.e., himself); Oorzhak was a Soviet relic. Kara-Ool mentioned his participation in the USG's Open World program as a huge learning experience for him. He actively used the knowledge gained in the U.S. to further his political career. YR's connection to the National Projects makes it, Kara-Ool thought, the most practical way to attract funding to the region.

Black PR Tactics Used Against Party of Life

19. (SBU) There is considerable enmity between RPL and YR in Tuva. Head of Parliament Vasiliy Oyun heads RPL's list and is Oorzhak's chief critic. In March, 13 YR deputies of the Legislative Chamber urged President Putin to dismiss Oorzhak for incompetence. They were all expelled from YR, and although later reinstated, many subsequently joined RPL.

110. (SBU) In the past week, fliers appeared in Kyzyl accusing RPL candidates -- and particularly the head of the party and former mayor of Kyzyl Zoya Sat -- of betraying the ideals of Shoigu. While the TEC is investigating the fliers, TEC Chair Mongush said it was unlikely anyone will be apprehended. Sayana Mongush theorized that fliers had been posted by either Rodina or YR Moscow political strategists. Their strategy would backfire, because too many Kyzylites know the candidates personally and know the allegations are false. She said that it was a mistake for campaigns to be directed by outsiders since they know very little about Tuvan culture and attitudes.

Rodina's Vote May Be Split

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111. (SBU) Rodina has approximately 640 members in Tuva. The party is running 15 candidates on the party list and no single-mandate candidates. Regional Head Khovalig said that some members left Rodina for the Party of Life. He expressed hope Rodina will cross the 7 percent threshold, but admitted that Rodina is competing for the same electorate as RPL, making it possible that neither party will succeed. Khovalig welcomed the creation of the upcoming new Rodina--Party of Life--Pensioners Party union because it would provide greater opposition to YR.

112. (SBU) Khovalig blamed YR and Oorzhak for the region's problems, saying that the situation in Tuva had steadily deteriorated in the past 16 years. He also said YR was behind an event last Saturday, in which a truck with Rodina fliers and pamphlets was stopped several times on the way to Kyzyl from the printing plant for document checks. When the truck reached Kyzyl, police accused the party of exceeding the number of fliers and pamphlets allowed by election law without explaining the basis for their suspicions. They made Rodina volunteers count all the pamphlets until 4 A.M., when it was finally agreed that their number did not exceed allowable limits.

¶13. (SBU) The KPRF operates out of a one-room office in a shabby building in downtown Kyzyl surrounded by busts of Lenin and old USSR Communist Party banners. Regional KPRF Head Vladimir Sodunam said that there are about 1000 registered members in Tuva and about 110 in Kyzyl. They were mainly older people, but 12 people in their 20s had joined in the last two months. The party is running 18 candidates on the party list and six single-mandate candidates. He expressed confidence that the party would win more than 7 percent of the votes, even with its limited resources because the number of Communist supporters in the electorate was much greater than the officially registered members. He complained that other parties had purloined the KPRF's campaign slogans.

Rally By Non-United Russia Parties "For Honest Elections"

¶14. (SBU) On September 18, over 2000 people from Kyzyl and several other regions took part in a rally against United Russia's use of administrative resources in the October 8 election campaign. The speakers from all opposition parties -- KPRF, Party of Life, Rodina, LDPR, Pensioners Party, and Patriots' Party -- called for honest elections and for regional and local officials to stop intimidating subordinates with dismissal and other consequences if they did not back YR. Rodina Head Khovalig told us that intimidation was especially rife in Tuva's regions, where heads of schools, hospitals, and other public institutions are told to "encourage" their subordinates to vote for United Russia. Sayana Mongush said that many people in the intelligentsia and cultural spheres will not vote at all in the elections because they are "fed up" with being manipulated by the parties and authorities.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) The regional administration has firm control over the economics and politics of Tuva. For the moment, most of its citizens above all want an improvement in their standard of living, and they will back whatever party makes the most convincing promise of a better life. With the combined resources of Oorzhak, Kara-Ool, Shoigu, and Karelin, YR it is virtually guaranteed a decisive majority on October 8.

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